

Yes on AB 374

Californians for Compassionate Choices

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CONTACTS: Steve Hopcraft, 916/457-5546, steve@hopcraft.com

Terminally-ill Patients, Seniors, Family Members, Doctors & Faith Leaders Hail Assembly Committee Vote to Aid Terminally-ill Californians

Coalition Praises Judiciary Committee for support for Aid in Dying

SACRAMENTO, CA - Bolstered by today's Assembly Judiciary Committee majority vote recommending passage of the California Compassionate Choices Act (AB 374, Berg, Levine and Núñez), a coalition of seniors, faith leaders, physicians and terminally ill Californians and their families announced a renewed push to pass a bill that would make it legal for terminally ill patients to obtain prescription medication to ease their dying process.

Some Californians with incurable, terminal illnesses are suffering needlessly prolonged, agonizing deaths. AB 374 by Assemblywoman Patty Berg, Assemblyman Lloyd Levine and Assembly Speaker Fabian Núñez would allow terminally-ill California patients to request, and their doctors to provide, a prescription medication to hasten a quiet, peaceful and dignified death. AB 374 would provide safe end-of-life choices for Californians similar to those the people of Oregon enjoy. The bill now goes to the Assembly Appropriations Committee for a vote.

Louise Schaefer, a terminal ALS patient from Lincoln, told the committee members that, "I have been diagnosed with ALS, for which there is no cure at all. I also have a brain stem cell infection. The disease has attacked my immune system, brain stem cells and more. The neurologist told me to prepare to become totally paralyzed, to be in severe pain and to prepare to die. Sometimes it feels as if terrorists are attacking my body."

Ms. Schaefer asked the committee to provide her with the peace of mind that better end of life choices would provide, "I believe in life, liberty and the pursuit of integrity. I believe in a life lived with purpose and according to the highest moral values. My time is ticking. I won't get better, only worse day-by-day. Passing this bill will bring me peace of mind and soul. Please help patients like me to have better choices at the end of our lives."

Sacramento physician Dr. Richard Ikeda, who cares for elderly, low income patients as medical director of Health For All community clinics, told the committee that California patients deserve better choices and that AB 374 would benefit all California terminal patients, "All patients regardless of income or status deserve the *best* medical care that our state can offer. Ethical medical care respects my patient's personal decision-making at the end of their life. I believe that my patients deserve access to, and information about, *all* options for medical care, *including aid in dying*. My patients are poor, not stupid.

They want to live, and die, with dignity. They don't want to be forced to die a more difficult death because of what *others* believe."

Dr. Ikeda criticized opponents who pretend that physicians supporting patient choice want to hasten their patients' deaths to save HMOs money, "I, and other doctors like myself, who care for underserved populations, are *offended* by opponents' charges of unethical behavior, that those of us who treat poor people would kill our patients in order to save money. Opponents' slogans insult the poor and use them as a weapon to restrict my patients' choices for a safe, legal process if their suffering becomes unbearable at the end of their life. I believe it is *unethical* to restrict my patients' choices based on authentic informed consent about *all* options for medical care, regardless of whether you are contemplating curative treatments, non-curative, or comfort treatment at the end of life."

Disability rights activist Russ Kletzing, a former president of the National Federation for the Blind, told the committee, "AB 374 is completely in line with the goals of the independent living movement. AB 374 treats disabled people exactly the same as it treats everyone else: it simply gives terminally ill, mentally competent adults, disabled or not, the power to choose the time, place and circumstances of their death. People with disabilities, just like those without disabilities, want choices and options in a fair, equitable playing field. While I understand that there is fear around this law for some, it is not a fear based on fact. Nine years of experience in Oregon have shown that Oregon's terminal patients, and elderly citizens, have better end of life choices and care than California. The question is not whether assisted dying will occur, but whether it will occur in a regulated and controlled fashion, with safeguards and scrutiny, or whether it will occur covertly, in a random, dangerous and unregulated manner. "

Reverend Ignacio Castuera, who serves at St. John's United Methodist Church in the Watts area of Los Angeles, said, "People of different faiths and beliefs agree that life is sacred and should be respected and preserved as long as humanly possible. However, when death is imminent, it is entirely respectful to the sanctity of life to allow a person to decide for himself or herself when and how they can ease their pain and suffering in a dignified manner."

Assemblywoman Patty Berg, co-author of AB 374, California's Death with Dignity Act said, "We see this over and over again. When people take a close look at this bill they realize it's safe and sound and good public policy. I'm very happy about today's vote."

Assemblyman Lloyd Levine, joint author of the bill, said the vote by the committee should reassure the legislature and governor. "I applaud today's courageous decision by the Assembly Judiciary Committee in passing this vitally important measure which would provide end-of-life choices for terminally-ill Californians. We know that when terminally ill people are at the end of their lives they don't want to die, but they also don't want to have to suffer. This bill puts forth a more humane way for people to make this very personal decision about how to end their lives. We look forward to continuing to move this legislation toward the Governor's desk," Levine said.

Also applauding the Assembly committee's vote was Barbara Coombs Lee, president of Compassion & Choices, the sponsor of both the Oregon law and the current California proposal. "Compassion &

Choices is pleased to see that the California legislature is acting on behalf of their constituent wishes. The polls have consistently shown that 3 of 4 Californians support aid in dying. The passage from The Judiciary Committee, clearly shows that this legislature is appropriately acting on behalf of its constituents,” said Coombs Lee. “These will be free and open discussions instead of whispers. And more of these patients will get better hospice and pain care. Only a small number of patients will both qualify for, and choose to take medication to hasten their deaths, as should be their right.”

The Congress of California Seniors, Commission on Aging, Older Women’s League of California, Gray Panthers, Compassion & Choices, American Civil Liberties Union, California National Organization for Women, Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF), California Seniors Coalition, Pasadena Senior Advocacy Council, Equality California, Drug Policy Alliance Network, American Medical Women’s Association, American Medical Students Association, Orange County Caucus, Conference of Delegates of the California Bar Association, End-of-Life Choices, National Association of Social Workers, Lambda Letters Project, AIDS Project Los Angeles, National Council of Jewish Women, Physicians for Compassionate Choices, California Association of Physician Groups (CAPG), Clergy for Compassionate Choices, California Democratic Party, Autonomy, Inc., and the Ayn Rand Institute support AB 374.

Individual supporters include, U.S. Senator Dianne Feinstein, and California State Treasurer Bill Lockyer.

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